







PARIMAL BHATTACHARYA

This is the Way We Go to School

Notes from Mayurbhanj

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First published in India in 2014 by Sikshsandhan, ND-7, VIP Area, IRC Village, Bhubaneswar-751015, Orissa.

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Sikshasandhan is a resource centre for education working for the improvement of standard of education of weaker sections of the society.

Cover Design by Jagabandhu Das

Printed at Siksha Prakashani, Bhubaneswar
Price : Rs.100/-
ISBN -13:978-81-87982-76-0

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TO BELL THE SCHOOL

INTRODUCTION

Sometime in May 2011, I received an e-mail from Dr. Jatindra Nayak, the chairman of Sikshasandhan. It was a proposal. He asked me if I would be interested in spending a week in Mayurbhanj, Odisha, where Sikshasandhan has been working in the field of elementary education among the tribal people, and write a report. I had met Dr. Nayak on an earlier visit to Odisha, when I went to Niyamgiri hills to research a book on bauxite mining and its impact on Dongria Konds. The support that he, and Sikshasandhan's secretary Anil Pradhan, extended on that trip had been invaluable. So it was gratitude on my part, mixed with an appetite for travel, that made me ponder over the proposal. But I was apprehensive: I had no idea about the terrain and the people. Moreover, I am not an expert on the subject. My interest in elementary education amounts to a book I have written on the scenario in West Bengal, and occasional contribution to the print media on the topic. But my doubts were tempered by reassuring words from Dr Nayak and Anil, and perhaps a streak of temerity in me, and one balmy November evening I landed up at Sikshasandhan's project office in Nuasahi, Mauyrbhanj.

The one week that I spent there, I traveled around 600 kilometers on the pillion of a motorbike, visited around 20 villages spread across three gram panchayats, inspected the schools there, and talked to villagers, teachers and children. At the end, all that have remained with me are some images - words, sounds, spectacles, smells - as ineffable as the light on the eyes of a little Kolho boy who treks two kilometers of rocky forest path every day to go to school. As I try to pin

those images on paper, they seem to turn into a blur, like the shapes flying across the motorbike's rearview mirror upon which was written:

OBJECTS IN THE MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR

Yes, the sights, sounds and the twinkle on the eyes have got closer and closer till they have seeped into me, and have begun to whisper with one another in the recesses of my memory. They are like grains falling in a golden shower through a winnower's fingers. When I went there it was harvest time, and I have seen men and women winnowing the grains. Here is a handful of that harvest.

I am grateful to Pradeep Sar for leading me on, literally and figuratively, and also for showering me with wisdom and insight. I am also indebted to Pitambar Sankhua, Bhrugu Rath and Amar Ranjan Bhoy for their unwavering assistance. All the field assistants and language teachers of Sikshasandhan in the gram panchayats of Kalamgadia, Noto and Ramchandrapur have extended co-operation, and I must particularly mention Birsa Singh and Yamuna Samad for their keen enthusiasm. I am indebted to them all.

1. CHASING A QUESTION

'Even the anganwadi children come here,' Amar informs us.

'You mean the anganwadi kitchen is run from here? Inside the school premises?' I ask.

'No no,' Amar protests. 'There is no anganwadi centre here. The kids aren't given food or anything. They just come along with their older siblings. They come because they know this is a school.'

A school. Hudisahi New Primary School is a bare brick-and-concrete shell in the middle of a forest clearing. There are two classrooms and a kitchen. The rooms have no doors and windows, no paved floors, not even a blackboard. A lone charpoy stands in a corner of one of the classrooms; the other has dug-up floor that resembles a pigsty - the little kids sit and play here. This being a Saturday, classes have given over early. But the scattered cinders on the kitchen floor tell us that a fire had last been lit quite a few days ago. The mid-day meal is not being served since last Tuesday, we gather later, because the quota of rice has not been dispatched on time from the panchayat office at Noto, a few kilometers away. This is a routine affair.

'But still the village kids come to school,' Birsa Biroli, the field assistant from Sikshasandhan, tells us. 'Our language teacher brings them here every morning. There are two regular teachers, but they are very irregular. They commute from Baleswar, which is 70 kilometers away.'

So, here is a school without regular teachers, midday meal, teaching aids, blackboards or anything. It came up three years

ago, and has been like this ever since. Meanwhile, the country has passed a historic law, Right to Education Act 2009, that makes it the responsibility of the state to ensure that every child between 6 and 14 years of age goes to school. We enter the rooms, dark even in the middle of the day because of the bare unpainted walls, and look around. There is no regulation boundary wall and no toilet facility. The nearest source of drinking water is half a kilometer away. We have been witnessing similar tales during the last few days, in the four gram panchayats where Sikshasandhan has been working.

'How do you persuade the villagers to send their wards to school? What do you tell them?' I ask Birsa.

Birsa searches for words:

Well, I tell them about the importance of education, about the Right to Education Act, about...'

'But they don't need much persuasion,' Amar cuts in. 'The kids just come to school. Even the little ones, who should be going to the anganwadi.'

Amar Ranjan Bhoy, Sikshasandhan field staff at Nuasahi project office, has expressly brought us here to prove a point: that children do not need much persuasion to be brought to school, even if that means a school like this. We stand in semidarkness and look out through the windowless holes. Outside, a brilliant winter afternoon buzzes among the trees: birds chirp, leaves murmur, goats bleat in the distance. The eyes, blinded by the light, require a couple of seconds to refocus on the alphabets that children have scrawled on brick walls with bits of clay. Suddenly, the absurdity of it all strikes me. Pradip Sar, my traveling companion here who has been working for Sikshasandhan on an assignment, caps this sense of absurdity with a remark:

'You see, I think we should stop looking for ways to bring children to school,' he says gravely. 'I think we should rather search out why do they come to school at all!'

There is a moment of silence and then we - Amar, Birsa and I - burst into laughter. Pradip watches us for a perplexed moment and then joins in. Our guffaw echoes in the bare room and flutters out into the forest. It is a kind of laughter that doesn't bring any relief or joy, but rather a deep sense of unease.

Why do the children come to school at all?

At a place where school means a dark bare brick shell in the middle of nowhere, without drinking water or regular mid-day meal, where government-appointment teachers are habitually absent and speak a different tongue, this is a question that cries out for an answer.

The one week that I spent at Mauyrbhanj in Odisha, touring three gram panchayats in Kaptipada block where Sikshasandhan has been working for universalisation of elementary education among tribal children through various innovative programmes, I chased this question.

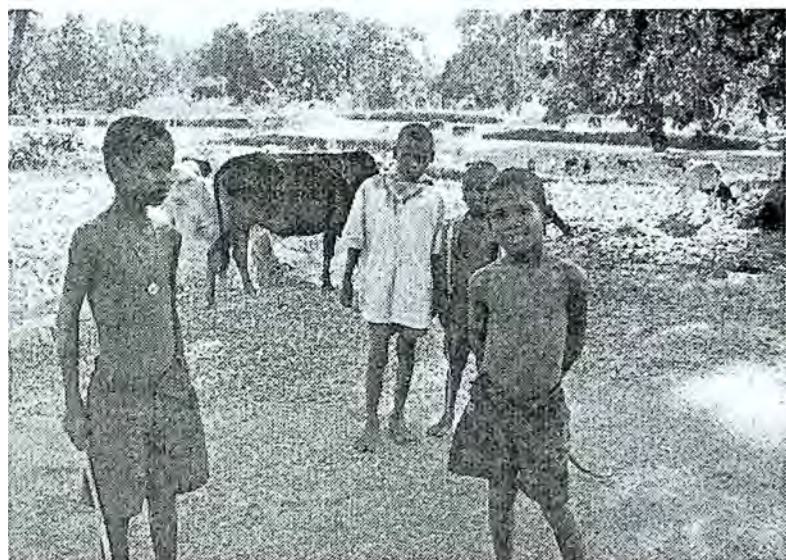


THIS IS THE WAY WE SLEEP AT SCHOOL: without an anganwadi centre, Hudisahi children come to school with their elder siblings

2. A CHAIN TALE

And yet this question is only one half of the story. I saw the other half as I traveled from one tribal hamlet to another in Simlipal forest range, riding the pillion of a motorbike, and saw hundreds of boys and girls - aged between 6 and 14, and younger - grazing cows and goats, working in the fields, carrying firewood from the forest, stitching sal-leaf plates, fetching water in large steel pitchers. It was harvest time, and both boys and girls could be seen working in the ripe yellow paddy fields alongside their parents. In the villages we saw older girls running the household and looking after the animals and younger siblings. In most of the schools we visited, the attendance rate hovered around half of the enrolment numbers, sometimes much lower. The teachers blamed this on harvest time, when tribal people need extra pairs of hands to collect the paddy from their tiny plots of forest land. They do it through community labour, known here as sangho-kamo, but young children also join in. Sometimes they go to neighbouring Balasore district, we learnt, to work in the fields of large landowners.

At a place where most families cannot manage two square meals a day round the year, a child means a belly to feed. A pair of hands also come with the belly. The food that the hands earn, after feeding the belly, goes to feed another belly, and thus sustain another pair of hands. Soon, that pair of hands will grow strong enough to feed another belly, and sustain another pair of hands. And thus the tale goes on.



THIS IS THE WAY WE DROP OUT OF SCHOOL:
the pants are the only remnants of school uniforms

It is a chain tale in the true folklore style, one that has been going on and on for more than six decades after independence. A piece of legislation enacted by the government of India in 2006 - Child Labour Abolition and Rehabilitation Act - could not break this chain. Can another piece of legislation - namely, Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 - do it?

To look for answers, I go to the primary stakeholders: the children.

Sikshasandhan is organizing a three-day winter camp at Dolipada PUP (Project Upper Primary) School in Ramchandrapur gram panchayat. Around 50 boys and girls from schools within the panchayat area are taking part in a workshop, where they will learn to draw, paint, compose and sing songs, enact skits - in short, to sharpen and display their creativity.

'Do all your neighborhood children go to school?' I ask them in Hindi. Someone translates it in Odia, and then Yamuna Samad, the field assistant, reframes the question in Ho. Most children belong to Kolho tribe, who speak Ho, and the younger ones do not understand Odia. Their responses, too, reach me via two tongues.

'No,' they reply. 'Some of them go to the fields and the forest.'

'And what do they take back home from there?' I ask.

'Firewood... sal leaves... paddy... guava... water...mushroom...amla...'

They go on compiling the list of items with glee.

'And what do you take back home from school?' I ask bluntly.

They fall silent.

'Books!' A boy shouts out, raising a tattered primer over his head.

'But you bring books from home. What else do you carry back? Something you don't bring from home?'

'Tikin mandijom!' one of them replies innocently, pointing to his tummy, provoking much laughter.

Tikin mandijom is midday meal in Ho.

Then one of the older boys, old enough to guess the answers adults seek from them, speaks up:

'Vidya!' he says. Education.

Everyone agrees. But I cannot resist myself to pester on.

'But what do you do with vidya? Do you burn it like firewood? Do you stitch it like sal leaves to make plates?'

I know this is a nasty one, and I hasten to give the answer myself. Education is like fruits that one can share with the family, I tell them, and it can be the little things that one learns everyday at school - like matters of hygiene, or information about our country and the people. As I go on explaining, and listen to my words being rendered into two languages, I can feel how vain and pompous I sound as I sit facing the eager boys and girls, some of whom I know will stop coming to school from the next session, and join their brethren out in the fields and the forest.

What else can it be? At a place where poverty level is as high as 75% and literacy is as low as 20%,[1] where the food people grow in the fields barely sustains them for half the year, a boy or a girl returning home with a bundle of firewood or sal leaves is more real than one returning from school. At a place where people live from moment to moment, from hunger to hunger, vidya seems like an obscure investment, a thing of the hazy future, a chimera. Here, the only real thing that a child apparently carries home from school is the midday meal in his stomach, a quantity of food that is saved at home, that will feed another stomach.

'Many families here with two children send one to school, and the other to the field or the forest,' Yamuna tells us. 'Or, if it is a girl, keep her at home for household work.'

Female literacy here is as low as 14.78 percent.

'What do they say when you tell them about the RTE act, that makes it mandatory for every child between 6 and 14 to go to school?' I ask her.

'Take one or two of them, they say, but I won't let you take all my children to school,' Yamuna replies, helplessness etched on her face.

1. Status of Elementary Education in Noto gram panchyat, Kaptipada, Odisha: A Baseline Analysis, Sikshasandhan 2011



TIKIN MANDIJOM: apparently, the only 'real thing' they take back home from school

3. LIVING STORIES OF HOPE AND CHANGE

Deep in the tribal hinterland of Mayurbhanj, a child at school effectively means a plate of food saved at home - provided, the midday meal is served at school. This is the most tangible reality, and an effective tool of persuasion. When we meet the Sikshasandhan-appointed language teachers of Kalamgadia gram panchayat area, one of them confesses that he uses this argument to persuade the parents.

'What else can you tell them?' he says, his voice heavy with despair and shame. 'These are poor illiterate people and they don't know the value of education.'

We have gathered at Bharat Nirman Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendra, a pink one-storied building recently built in the premises of Kalamgadia gram panchayat office at a cost of rupees 10 lakhs. It is meant for activities related to the development in the panchayat area. The language teachers of twelve schools within the panchayat have been invited at the meeting; there are also the three field assistants - Birsa Singh, Sujata Shau and Yamuna Samad from Ramchandrapur. The keys to the locked rooms could not be found, so we are sitting on the tiled verandah floor, exchanging views and sharing experiences. Everyone belongs to a tribal community, Kolho or Santal, except two women - Sujata and Manjulata Behera. The latter is the language teacher at Sarisua Primary School. There has been some resentment among the local people as they are non-tribals, but Sikshasandhan has stood its ground because both have long experiences of working with the organization. They are also very articulate and know the tribal languages.

'Earlier, most children at Sarisua were reluctant to attend school because they couldn't understand what the teacher said. But I made it a point to go to each home and talk to the parents. Now the kids are very regular. Every morning, before the school starts, I make a tour of the village to make sure that none is left behind. I tell them stories and sing songs, and they love it,' Manjulata says, beaming with pride.

She is dressed in a blue starched sari and wears a wristwatch. All the teachers and field assistants are young, neatly dressed and speak with confidence. Their presence in the schools has made visible impact on students' attendance and they are eager to share their experiences. All of them have come to the meeting on bicycles and are carrying mobile phones. These are little details that would go unnoticed elsewhere, but here, where most young men and women are to be seen in the fields and households tied to a timeless pattern of subsistence livelihood, they are a picture of hope and change. Most of them received their intermediate and college degrees from Kaptipada and Sarat, and they are happy with their work and its positive outcome.

'You know, people used to look down upon me as I am from Pungichua, a most remote village that remains cut off from the rest of the world for three months a year because of a stream,' confides Ramrai Singh, the language teacher at Pungichua New Primary School. 'But now they address me as 'Sir' and come to me to seek advice.'

A teacher in these areas generally means a person from the coastal region, usually from upper castes, who never speaks with the villagers, resides in distant towns and commutes to school in a motorbike. (We even saw two lady teachers coming to a primary school near Sarat in a car, a yellow Nano.) But

Ramrai is different: he is from the community, and his duty to his pupils extends beyond the four walls of the class room. For example, Pungichua school has severe water problem and children have to trek more than a kilometer after midday meal to drink water from a forest stream. It was Ramrai who took up the matter at the block level and even persuaded the BDO to make an inspection.

Ramrai Singh, the only young man from Pungichua to have ventured out of his hamlet for an intermediate degree, was born in 1986, the year the National Policy on Education was declared. That was the first national education policy that gave special emphasis on promoting education among tribal people, opening more primary schools in those areas, developing curricula in tribal languages and encouraging more tribal youth to take up teaching. Those initiatives never properly took off, but in a curious way Ramrai's story celebrates the silver jubilee of NPE 1986.

Like him, everyone gathered here has a story, a story of grit and hard work, of never dropping out, of walking long distances to go to high schools, of fighting hunger and indifference of the teachers, of never having anyone at home or village to help with studies, of withstanding pressure to give up and join their brethren in the fields and the forest. Now they wear these stories on themselves, upon their faces glowing with hope and confidence.

'Why should anyone need to tell the parents about sending a child to school to save a plate of food?' I ask. 'You can tell your stories instead. You are the living examples of what one can achieve through education.'

The modest smiles that break upon their faces tell me that they know it. The sincerity and commitment that they bring to their work comes from this knowledge.



WEARING TALES OF CONFIDENCE AND HOPE:
language teachers and field assistants of Sikshasandhan

4. THE LADDER AND THE KEY

Birsa Singh's house is in Kalamgadia, beside a wide grassy field dotted with old mohua trees: a row of thatched huts around a courtyard, and a small plot of fenced homestead land. Birsa and his elder brother live here with their families. Newly harvested paddy, glowing golden yellow, is heaped in the middle of the courtyard. Chicks skitter about, ducks keep up a racket, Birsa's little son plays with a spotted kid goat, an old woman basks under the warm noonday sun on a charpoy. A dozen sanitary pans are heaped in a corner. The wife of Birsa's brother is a panchayat worker, we learn, and these pans are part of a sanitation campaign under the National Rural Health Mission. Like most government campaigns, this too has been a failure here, although there is a pucca latrine behind the courtyard of Birsa's house. We don't ask whether they use it. Instead, we discuss the provisions of Forest Rights Act 2006 for which Birsa has invited us to his house. His brother Singrai and a couple of villagers are also present.

A voluntary organization has translated the act in Odia and has been distributing it in booklet form. Birsa has read it thoroughly. He has also made a list of the forest lands villagers here have been tilling for generations, and also the community lands that belong to the village. Here too, like elsewhere in the country, the act is yet to make a proper beginning and his efforts are being routinely scotched by corrupt land revenue officials. But Birsa is patient, a steely determination sparkle in his quiet, intelligent eyes. I later learn that there is talk of his becoming the village sarpanch in the election next year.

Birsa has a college degree; his elder brother Singrai, too, has one. He had got a job in the defence canteen services, but couldn't pay the bribe that was demanded at the time of appointment. He now devotes himself entirely to the family-owned land and cattle. But Singrai has seen to it that his own children get quality education; his son and daughter study at a private hostel school in Bhadrak. His daughter Sanjeevani, who is in Class XI, comes to greet us. Her annual examination is over and she has come home last week to wait for the results. She takes tuition in two subjects, English and mathematics, from teachers of her own school. They charge Rs. 175 for each subject. Singrai spends around Rs. 2000 per month for his children's education. He can afford it because his wife earns a regular salary. Birsa's wife, too, is an anganwadi sahayika. Both the women have studied up to class eight. Birsa's elder son will be seven next year, and he has plans to send him to a good hostel school outside the village. By that time, he will probably become the sarpanch. Sanjeevani, too, will possibly go to a degree college in Kaptipada. Her mother will probably get a promotion in a year or two. A family in a Kolho village deep inside the Simlipal forest will climb up the social and economic ladder, slowly but surely. And all this thanks to an investment in an immaterial equity: education. At a place where literacy is 20 percent, 75 percent people officially live below poverty line, 85 percent children are malnourished, this is a story worth looking at.

And yet such stories are lost under the pervasive saga of despair and misery, betrayal and disenchantment. It is harvest time, and all the able-bodied men and women are out in the fields at this hour of the day. So, Birsa takes us to meet a group of village elders. A Kolho village, unlike the hamlets of other tribal communities, is a scattered settlement of small groups

of hutments standing apart and nestled amid groves and forest clearings (something that makes it all the more difficult to bring the children to school). We leave the motorcycle at Birsa's place and walk up a narrow trail through a wooded slope. A lone adobe hut stands beside a cropped field. Odia film song, playing on a radio or a mobile phone, emanates from inside; a red bicycle leans against the wall. Birsa calls out and a teenage boy emerges: he is wearing jeans, red nylon t-shirt and a bracelet. His name is Turam Singh, we learn, and he is studying at the +2 college (intermediate) at Sarat. Together, we go to the place of the meeting, around hundred meters away under a giant tamarind tree. Turam walks the cycle by his side and stands leaning against it jauntily at the meeting. We - Birsa, Pradip and I - sit on a charpoy that someone has placed there. A knot of old village men sit around us on their haunches upon the dusty ground. A group of women and children watch us from a fenced courtyard.

Suddenly I remember the Raj sketches and aquatints I have seen of colonial sahibs meeting native villagers under the tamarind trees: they too sat on charpoys, their turbaned orderlies behind them, to hear petitions and adjudicate. We, on the other hand, have come to discuss something that does not seem to be remotely connected with the way life follows its quotidian rhythm here. We talk about neither BPL rice nor the patta of forest land, but about universal enrolment of children in schools. The old men stare at us with dull rheumy eyes. Turam gets bored. The women get busy with their work of stitching sal-leaf plates. The children lose interest in the strangers and begin to play. Only one little boy, naked and with a malformed head, stands crookedly wedged between the ropes of a charpoy and stares at us daftly. He is suffering from cerebral palsy, Birsa informs us, and remains confined like this throughout the day. He cannot stand or walk.

Purmi Singh has a matriculate son who works and lives in Bhadrak. His two other sons, both school drop-outs, live with him and work in the fields. For three months a year, when there is no work in the village, they break stones at a quarry atop Sukhuapatta hills.

I ask Purmi for his thoughts on the value of education, on what education gives to people. The old man stares silently at the distance, the lines on his face deepening. I know this is a difficult one; education has taken away one of his sons.

'Education gives people the confidence to come forward and speak to strangers,' he finally replies.



THE MISSING KEY:
illiterate Turi Barja from Pungichua

This is a piece of wisdom that takes time to sink in. I understood its full import as I toured some of the remote hamlets of Kalamgadia and Noto gram panchayats. The more remote the places, the more taciturn and timid were the people. They clammed up when they saw strangers on a motorbike, or when Pradeep asked them questions in Odia. Generations have grown up, grown old and died in an area without a school. All

are tribal people, and they speak a tongue which is different from Odia. They come in contact with Odia-speaking people when they are old enough to venture out of the village, to sell their labour or minor forest produce.

It is now a universally accepted fact that learning a language becomes difficult as one reaches puberty. Also, these people's first contact with the outside world is usually in the form of cunning labour contractors, middlemen and moneylenders. In effect, it is the enduring myth of the big bad world out there, ready to cheat the simple tribal, that makes these people turn inward and reclusive. Eight to ten years of school education, on the other hand, can reverse the process and bust the myth. It can give them an exposure in Odia language and culture, give them the necessary confidence to interact with the outside world, to integrate them with the state's society and polity.

Education is the key to the larger world. This is an axiom I have always known, but have never viewed it so clearly, written on the face of a cowering tribal man.



CLIMBING THE LADDER:
Birsa, his sons and niece Sanjibani

5. THE WHEELS OF HISTORY

But whether they go to school or not, the outside world rarely fails to reach them. Often it finds insidious ways.

From an inspection of Hudisahi NPS, empty as a shell on a Saturday afternoon, we walk up the wooded hillside to the village. Hudisahi is a hamlet of about 50 households, mostly Kolhos and a dozen Mahakuds - the latter listed among other backward communities or OBCs. All of them live much below the poverty line, although many are yet to receive their entitlement cards. The last survey was done here some ten years ago, we are told.

Hudisahi lies at the back of the beyond, on the periphery of Noto panchayat and at the foot of forested Simli hills. There is no all-weather road here; one needs to trek three kilometers of dirt track across rocky fields and forests and ford a number of hill streams to seek essential amenities and services. People frequently die of simple curable diseases, like diarrhea or typhoid, before they can avail basic medical aid. The state health department runs a rural ambulance service, called Janani Express, for pregnant mothers. But there being no road, Janani Express cannot come to Hudisahi.

'What is the infant mortality rate?' I ask, keeping my voice low to match the sensitive nature of the subject.

'Fifty-fifty!' replies Gusey Banara, swaying his outstretched palm like a weighing scale, before Birsa Biroli can translate my query in Ho.

It means a child born in the village has a fifty percent chance of survival. Most of the deaths occur within the first year of birth. Odisha is one of the few states in India that has a very high infant mortality rate of around 70 per thousand live births. But 'fifty-fifty' means 500 deaths per thousand live births! The figure numbs the senses. I dare not ask the percentage of children immunized after birth.

Gusey, a panchayat ward member, is in his early thirties. Most of the people gathered at the village meeting place under an ancient peepal tree are of the same age or younger. The only senior citizen in the gathering is Sabram Singh Banara, 70 years old, the oldest person in the village. There is Kuan Singh, chairman of school management committee, and Seth Banara, the vice-chairman. Both are in their late twenties and illiterate, like the others. Their contribution in the SMC amounts to thumb impressions that they put under the minutes of meetings that the school headmaster makes up every month. Here, too, they remain mostly silent and give short monosyllabic answers to our questions. Gusey does most of the talking - and in Hindi. He lived for two years in Gujarat and worked in road construction, in a National Highway Authority project. He picked up Hindi from there. The only other person who knows Hindi in the village is Amin Singh. He too worked for a whole season at a brick kiln near Hyderabad, but the middleman who took him there cheated him of his dues.

'That man is a crook,' Gusey says. 'He does this to everyone and has made a lot of money. He lives in Bandhasahi.'

'Why do you let him go scot-free?' I ask.

'What can one do?' Amin smiles helplessly. 'Everybody knows that man is a cheat. But there is no other way and people go with him in the hope of making some money.'

At such a young age, Amin has learnt to deal with his misfortune by generalizing it. Anger is a luxury here, even at youth, and one soon learns to devise inner strategies to survive endless series of adversities that is the other name of life. In most of the villages we toured, we met men like Gusey and Amin, sucked into distant metropolitan centers by the behemoth of 'development' - in road construction, real estate and infrastructure projects - and then cast off. Theyreturn to the villages with dashed hopes and a hard view of the big bad world out there; in the process, they pick up workable Hindi (and perhaps a communicable disease, even AIDS). They present the seamy side of India's recent growth story. Ironically, it is these men, grown embittered and cynical, who usually came forward and communicated with us first.

But Hudisahi has nothing to offer to men like Gusey and Amin. The soil around here is rocky, giving work to people for not more than four to five months a year. The forest, too, is degraded. The only thing it seems to yield steadily is sal leaf, with which people make plates. Water is a precious resource in the whole region, especially during the summer months.

Was it always like this? I ask Sabram Singh Banara.



AUTUMN OF THE MATRIARCH:
the centenarian lady was one of the early migrants from Singhbhum

No, the forest was thicker and life was easier when Sabram was a boy, when he came with his parents from Singhbhum and settled here. In fact, all the Kolhos in this part of Mayurbhanj came from Singhbhum region at around the turn of the 20th century. This is one of the reasons, I am told, why Singh is a popular title with the community: it carries the mark of their place of origin. They also carry the history of migration in their memories, handed down from generation to generation and matured into mythical lores. Birsa Singh took us to an old man in his village, Laxman Badra, the repository of these lores. Laxman narrated how the Mundas (Kolhos) originated from Harappa; came to live in Singhbhum for thousands of years until the British arrived; how they fought heroically against the colonial power, were defeated and had their tongues cut off; how seven families migrated to the dense forests of Simlipal and set up home over a century ago.

Laxman's mythic lore carries seeds of history. In early 19th century, British colonialism in Chhotonagpur introduced a host of middlemen and moneylenders between the rulers and the tribal peasantry. From free landowners, Mundas and Oraons were reduced to serfs and their community life was shattered. They organized protests that culminated in the Kol Revolt of 1831-32. Brutal suppression followed, and the tribals remained subdued for a while, until they began to resort to a form of passive protest of emigration at the end of the century. Some of them went as far as Andamans, others went to work in the tea gardens, and some, like the Kolhos of Mayurbhanj, migrated to neighbouring states of Odisha and Bengal. A century of dispossession could not rob them of that colourful history; it manifests itself in a title like Singh, or a name like Birsa - a name that recalls the legendary rebel Birsa Munda.

But a part of that history still perpetuates itself in another form here.

From Hudisahi we go to nearby Bandhasahi, a village of Mahatos. Hudisahi and Bandhasahi are a study in contrast. Many of the houses in Bandhasahi have tiled roofs and strong wooden doors with latches; there are also a number of tubewells, and the concrete posts by the wayside hold the promise of electricity under Rajiv Gandhi Rural Electrification scheme. Two pick up vans stand at the mouth of the village. We meet Ramchandra Mahato, the sarpanch, a smart paan-chewing young man who speaks fluent Hindi and takes us around the village to the fields. The fields are irrigated with spring water under an Integrated Tribal Develepment Authority scheme, although Mahatos are not tribals. They belong to the OBC. Ramchandra owns 35 acres of prime land, irrigated round the year, where he grows paddy, tomatoes (called bilati here) and other vegetables. Most villagers are landowners and have work in the fields throughout the year, he tells us, so that there is not much demand for work under NREGA. But the real reason behind Bandhasahi's prosperity lies in trading. Mahatos buy the sal-leaf plates from the tribals and sell them at a much higher price in the wholesale market at Kaptipada. They also indulge in usury. Their relationship with the tribals is based on exploitation, but also on mutual dependence that goes back for nearly a century.

On our way back, we see a concrete road being built at the initiative of Bandhasahi villagers. This will make it easier for pick-up vans to enter the forest villages and give the relationship between the Mahatos and tribals a new twist.

The historic migration from Singhbhum in colonial times could not save the Kolhos here from middlemen and mahajans.



FRUITS OF DEVELOPMENT:
caste hindu teachers commuting daily from distant Balasore

6. A TALE OF TWO VILLAGES

The Right to Education Act is an unparalleled piece of legislation where education is recognized as a constitutional right and the state commits itself to educating nearly 25 crore young people between 6 and 14 years of age. A country whose performance in this field during the last two decades has been pathetic, even worse than some of our poorer neighbours like Bangladesh, Srilanka and Nepal1, one wonders whether the promise enshrined in the law makes a mockery of itself. Such cynicism is inescapable as one tours the forest villages of Mayurbhanj and watches dozens of out-of-school boys and girls working in the fields, herding animals, carrying water and firewood. Five years after the Child Labour Abolition and Rehabilitation Act was passed, these scenes are a part of our daily reality. How long will it take for the RTE Act to take effect? How many years or decades before all these boys and girls in the fields and the forest are in school?

As one gropes for answers, a disquieting image comes to mind: the image of an autistic boy one has seen in Kalamgadia, hemmed in between the ropes of a charpoy, standing crookedly and staring with vacant eyes.

Pundits compare India's performance in the field of elementary education with China. Some blame the democratic system for the sorry state of affairs even six decades after independence. But ours is no single defining story. It is a land of contested realities that unfold in complex ways. Here every story has a foil, every thesis an antithesis. Thus, after being besieged by images of apathy and ineptitude, corruption and

criminality, I heard the story of two hamlets: Pungichua and Tendu. Both are as remote as the other, two kilometers away from each other and nestled deep inside the forest; both remain cut off from the outside world during the monsoon months because of a hill stream. When the government decided to set up a school in Pungichua, the people of Tendu protested. If Pungichua can get a school then why not Tendu? They argued. If the sanction is for one school only, then why not set it up at Tendu instead of Pungichua? The tug of war continued for some time until Pungichua won. As a mark of protest, the people of Tendu refused to send their children to school.

But that was two years ago. I go there to see with my own eyes the situation now.

A new Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana road forks near Gokulchandrapur primary school. The right arm goes to Sarat; we take the left arm, move for about 10 kilometers along a forest of sal, mohua and other tal trees and then leave the asphalt road and into the forest. Soon we come to the hill stream, a tributary of Sunei river, a trickling rivulet upon rock bed that swells during the rains and cuts off Pungichua and other forest hamlets from outside world for three months a year. A concrete bridge is being built here, god knows for how long, since the ironwork has already turned rusty. But we have no difficulty to cross the stream on foot along with our motorcycle. A rocky forest track winds up from here, along the foothills of what is known here as Sukhuapatta Pahar, a low thickly-wooded hill range that runs all the way from Baripada to Nilagiri in Balasore district . Sukhuapatta literally mean 'dry leaf'; maybe it is so named because the dense forest of sal and other deciduous trees ensure a steady supply of the leaves with which people stitch plates - a work that sustains them during the months when there is no work. We pass a

small hamlet of about ten households, learn the direction of Pungichua, and thread our way through a forest of denuded acacia trees. Pale sunlight falls slantingly, turning the carpet of dry leaves iridescent brown. A raven caws mournfully upon a bare branch. Who would imagine we are out here to visit a school? It seems like an absurd adventure.

I share this thought with Pradeep, absorbed in negotiating the skidding wheels of the bike along the boulder-strewn track.

'Imagine what would happen if we have a punctured tyre,' Pradeep says.

We share a hopeless laugh. During the past few days that I have been touring the area, I cannot remember to have seen a single repairing shop.

Pungichua NPS, like the Hudisahi school, sits in the middle of a forest clearing some distance away from the village. It seems as if someone has dropped it absent-mindedly from the sky and has forgotten about it. The nearest source of water is 1.5 km away, in the forest stream. The three-roomed building is yet to be completed. Three classes share a single room, mid-day meal is cooked in another, while the third room stores bamboo, wooden planks and other masonry materials. Kanai Charan Singh, the teacher, keeps his motorbike there. Kanai Charan, 57, is from Bhumij tribe and commutes from Kalamgadia. An overturned drum acts as a table upon which he keeps the attendance registers. He consults them to give us the data. Class I - 28, class II - 12 and class III - 37: altogether 77 pupils. Forty-one of them are girls and, what is more remarkable, 38 children are from Tendu. Ramrai, our language teacher, asks the boys and girls from Tendu to raise their arms, and it is apparent that the enmity between the two hamlets over the location of the school has become a thing of the

past: pupils from Pungichua and Tendu sit together. Pradeep takes out his camera and captures the moment: a boy from Pungichua holding aloft the arm of his mate from Tendu. Both smile jubilantly and their teeth glisten.

The boy from Tendu is Mathai Singh. He has curly hair, bright beady eyes and he studies in class II. Every morning, he treks two kilometers through the forest to come to school. On the way, he has to cross the stream that passes between the two hamlets and swells during the monsoon months. But Mathai, as well as many others from Tendu, never fails to show up at school as long as the water is waste-deep, wading through it with his books and clothes over his head. But that is nothing. If he doesn't come to school, he will have to guard his father's tiny patch of forest land against animals. Moreover, the school offers tikin mandijom, though not very regularly. After the meal, he has to walk another kilometer and back to wash hands and drink water.

Listening to Mathai, I seem to get a new perspective on the question Pradeep had asked at Hudisahi, the question we have been chasing all these days: Why do they come to school at all?

Kanai Charan does not know when this water problem will be solved - perhaps not before he retires from service. The panchayat department would not transport the machinery for a tubewell until the bridge is built over the stream. In fact, the school building is yet to be completed but the building materials have been dumped and are lying near the stream. Kanai Charan does not have the resources to carry them here. Also, masons from outside are reluctant to come in this jungle

as two of them died of cerebral malaria while working here. Ensuring steady supply of midday-meal rice and provisions from Kalamgadia is also a big problem, he tells us, his face etched with lines of anxiety and despair.

Kanai Charan is so overcome with the hardware of education that he has no time for pondering over the software. Here he is confronted with teaching children of three grades together, a situation that his training has not prepared him for. Neither does he have the energy to innovate at the fag end of his teaching career. Over the years, he has evolved a coping strategies of huddling the children, keeping them busy with writing work, and using punishment to maintain discipline. It goes without saying that learning becomes a casualty in the process.

We find them sitting listlessly on the floor, trying to read and memorize something from torn, dog-eared books, or copying alphabets on pieces of slate. A couple of small children, siblings of the pupils, sleep in a corner of the room. They wake up when the midday meal is ready (rice and soya nuggets curry on the daywe visited), or when Ramrai tells a rhyme or lore in their language. The school bags, made out of cement sacks, are strewn on the floor: soiled, crumbling text books and steel plates peep out of them. The class II primer has sketches of flora, fauna and objects including apple, aeroplane and their names written in Odia. But Mathai and his friends fail to identify most of them. Does anyone in Tendu eat apple? Is this area under the flight path of an aeroplane? What do they call an aeroplane in Ho? Does Mathai know the name of our country?

I ask it through Ramrai, who translates it for me. Mathai looks at us timorously for some moments, looks at his friends, his bright beady eyes turn blank.

'Sukhuapatta Pahar,' he replies at last.

: Amartya Sen & Jean Dreze, 'Putting Growth in its Place', Outlook, 14 November 2011



THIS IS THE WAY WE GO TO SCHOOL: carrying water bottles like their urban middle-class counterparts, but the nearest source of water is 1 km away

7. THE GUILDED CAGE

Every morning, at around 10.30, as we traveled from Nuasahi to Sikshasandhan's project area in Kalamgadia, we passed on the way several men wearing sky blue shirts, navy blue trousers and riding motorbikes. Theywere the teachers, coming from Balasore, Bhadrak or other towns. A recent government directive has made it mandatory for school teachers in Odisha to wear uniforms - blue shirts and trousers for men, pink saris for women. I got to know several of them since we visited their schools. We exchanged greetings as we crossed one another on the way. One of them was Amalendu Behera*(*name changed), a young man with a chiseled face and a vermilion tilak on his forehead, who came to his school everyday from Balasore, more than 50 kilometers away. He burned Rs 140 worth of petrol daily, twice the amount an average family earns here per day. When I pointed this out, Amalendu rued the fact that he had mistakenly entered Mayurbhanj instead of Balasore in the preferred choice of district in his application form. He was preparing to sit in the recruitment examination again. But perhaps Amalendu was misstating the fact. Most of the young teachers we met were from more developed coastal districts and belonged to the upper castes. They opted for these remote places because there was less competition here. It was pointless to ask them why they did not prefer to stay near their schools.

So, the network of metalled Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana roads facilitates in these remote tribal areas the daily import of a precious commodity: education. The few things

that are exported are cheaper and lighter in comparison: sal-leaf plates and seasonal labour. But that is another story. Fact is, an unbridgeable gulf separates these teachers from the pupils they teach, from the respective communities they come from. In Kalamgadia and Noto gram panchayats, Sikshasandhan has introduced a commendable innovation by appointing language teachers from the local community, who act as a bridge between the teachers and the taught, between a pedagogy that is framed in distant urban centers and the indigenous knowledge base.

Sikshasandhan is also generating learning materials that are in tune with local needs. This is another crucial area because the boundaries between the pedagogy and community knowledge are rigidly drawn here, and the textbook serves as the only source of 'legitimate knowledge'. Teachers never relate to the knowledge base of the children.

But knowledge knows no boundaries: outside the narrow, definitive domain of the textbook , often inscribed in a language the child doesn't understand, it thrives and self-generates in multiple forms here. In the remote forest regions of Mayurbhanj, a school-going child is a miniature adult - she is treated by her family and society as such. She knows most life-sustaining skills, including a sound knowledge of her natural surroundings, and has already imbibed a number of community values. But unfortunately, she leaves all these intellectual acquisitions outside when she enters the classroom, like the plastic sandals she sometimes wears. Her cognition, sharpened by living in close harmony with nature, goes to sleep like her younger sibling on the classroom floor. Her school gets only a mute shadow of her. As we toured the forest villages and visited dozens of schools in session, I was surprised by the eery silence that prevailed - so different from usual urban schools, where one can hear the cacophony of chirpy children

from a distance. I knew many of these children suffered from malnutrition, but surely that was not the only reason for their listlessness. A few dozen children of different age groups often shared a single classroom, and yet there was no racket: they looked so timid and enervated. One could hear the chirping of birds and rustle of leaves outside the classrooms. The forest and fields throbbed with life and activity under a warm, dazzling November sun. It was impossible not to recall the million dollar question:

Why do the children come to school at all?

Pradeep, a skilled illustrator, had shown me a cartoon titled 'The Paradox of RTE Act'. The government - personified in a bald, fat man in black suit - is holding aloft a cage called EDUCATION and chasing a group of children who are running away into the forest.



THEREBY HANGS A TALE: Ramchandrapur Upper Primary School

And what a gilded cage it is. As one travels along the silken new PMGSY roads winding through the forest of tall sal and mohua trees, the pucca school buildings spring starkly into view. Most of them have received a new coat of pink paint, with large painted grandfather clocks frozen at 10:30 (the school starting time), painted height scales (six feet high - in an area where the Body Mass Index of more than half the pupils is below the

standard measure), and a prominently displayed Student Helpline e-mail address (in an area without electricity and computers). The teachers, too, are dressed in regulation uniforms. These are the visible symbols of a government intent on implementing the new act, only the cold, uniform aspects of the buildings and the bureaucratized hieroglyphs they display make the schools indistinguishable from health centres, police stations or other state facilities. Their ambience is also so different from the home and the world the tribal children in the forest villages of Mayurbhanj inhabit. Just as the authoritative pedagogy has no space for the indigenous knowledge the children imbibe from their community, the lived reality of the latter eludes the mechanical grid of the school system.

Pradeep shared tidbits from his experience of making a photo documentation of nearly 1,500 school children in the panchayats where Sikshasandhan is working. Thus, many pupils were found to have been enrolled under names they themselves did not know.

'It is puzzling but common,' he said, smiling. 'For example, I would find Asman Kisku enrolled in class III but would fail to locate him for a whole week, in school or in the village. Nobody had ever heard of Asman. Then I would run into a boy named Bagun who is in class III but whose name is not in the school register. It took some time to discover that Asman and Bagun are the same boy. He had spent his pre-school years at his mother's place where he was called Bagun. During the time of admission, his father had given him the name Asman and then forgot about it.'

Sometimes he found the same pupil appearing before the camera against two names in two different classes. On enquiry, it turned out that the child was innocently appearing as a proxy for an elder sibling who had stopped coming to school long time ago.

'Parents sometimes come to schools with the demand to change the surnames of their children,' Amar added. 'For example, someone with the surname Tiu appears one day to say that he doesn't like it and henceforth wants to be called Singh.'

What is in a name? At a place where a BPL card or a government welfare scheme is as elusive as a moonbeam, there is nothing in it. Nandan Nilekani and his grand scheme of Unique Identification Number for every Indian citizen belong to a different planet.

'You go to a school here and ask a pupil his date of birth. None of them knows it. In fact, none of the parents knows it. The teachers put arbitrary dates during the time of admission.'

What is in a date? At a place where the chance of a new-born surviving the first year of life is 'fifty-fifty', where a high percentage of births take place at home and the percentage of neo-natal immunization is in single digit, there is nothing in it. Chalta hai. Recently, according to newspaper reports, India's prime minister Manmohon Singh is said to have confessed with characteristic modesty that he doesn't know his exact date of birth.1

In the remote tribal settlements of Mayurbhanj, a child's date of birth is as misty as a country called Sukhuapatta Pahar.

1. Asian Tribune, 26 September 2011



DARKNESS AT NOON:
the school in Tendu

8. THE EARS OF EDUCATION

In a country called Sukhuapatta Pahar, people grow or collect from forests most of the things they need and make do with very little from outside. It is evident in the village haats that take place once or twice a week. But we also saw tiny temporary markets coming about on the wayside late in the afternoon in the middle of the forest. There would be one or two peddlers with spices, dried fish or gutkha - their ware easily transportable upon carriers of bicycles - and, invariably, a knot of men gathered around a woman selling handia from a large aluminum pot. Handia: the common man's drink in the tribal region is also a part of the staple diet. People ferment it at home and even carry it in the fields. We have seen families working at harvest gathered under the shade of an acacia tree during lunch break and drinking the white soupy liquor in sal-leaf bowls; it is nourshing and perhaps slightly soporific. Rice is the main ingredient, and BPL rice at two rupees a kilo has made handia a commodity that one can sell for profit. Tales are rife in the tribal settlements of how some people have become rich by brewing and selling handia. The temptation is too high and Yamuna Samad told us the story of a language teacher, a woman, who taught at school during the day and sold handia in the afternoon. She needed some persuasion to give up the practice.

No, handia isn't brewed and consumed at Yamuna's house. Like her, her husband is an educated social worker and they converse at home in Odia, alongside Ho. Her four-year old boy understands the language and can even speak it. Yamuna

has plans of sending him to a good hostel school, preferably in Bhubaneswar where she has contacts. A generation earlier, a woman like Yamuna would probably have converted to Christianity. A Baptist mission has been working in the region for more than half a century. But Yamuna knows about the bouquet of schemes and facilities that government has on offer for the uplift of the tribal people. Working with an organization like Sikshasandhan has given her the confidence and resourcefulness to avail them.

One can detect a village haat from a mile away by the string of wayside handia stalls, separated from each other by about twenty steps. The idea is to rip off the last paisa from the homebound tribal man, who would stop at every stall on his way home for a quick swig, and would perhaps sleep away the evening upon a culvert. But the way to the big, weekly haat at Sarat is strewn with stalls selling more potent stuff: hooch in plastic pouches. Ear-splitting film songs are belted out of teashops, and a bunch of boys from the local intermediate college are drawn to the large posters of recent releases from Bollywood. They are rather nattily dressed and some of them flash mobile phones; some have even spiked up their hair with gel. With customers like them in mind, a couple of book stalls have come up; they sell made-easys, guide books for competitive examinations and Odia soft porn. There are also the usual stalls of vegetables, grains, yeast balls (for fermenting handia), cheap fabric, recycled plastic goods, cosmetics of fake brands, coloured soft drinks, fluorescent sweetmeats, posters of filmstars and packaged consumer goodies. Dusty, sweaty press of humanity squeeze along the winding spaces where urban meets the rural, mainstream meets the margins in myriad garish, loud, vicious ways. Presiding over this disorder is a newly-built high-tech police station with barbed wire and sniper portholes, on the look out for a grim future.

This is the outside world making inroads into the tribal hinterland of Simlipal. A world that has taken away Purmi Singh's matriculate son and many others like him. Education here is like a double-edged knife that cuts both ways: it either remains alien and forces the child to drop out of school, or alienates him from his community and society. He is often forced to make a choice early on, between his own world and that of the school. I interviewed a Class IV boy from Dolipada PUP hostel school, the brightest in his class, who does not like to go home during holidays.

'Why?' I had asked, surprised. 'Don't you have your family there?'

'Yes, but I don't find a suitable playmate in my village,' he said peevishly. 'All are patho-poribana pila.'

Patho-poribana pila - boys who do not study. The boy dreams of studying science, becoming an engineer and landing a job in a big city like Bhubaneswar.

This is a universal story that gets a sharper edge deep in the forested setting of Mayurbhanj. Why should it always be like this? To search for an answer, we go to Surai Hembram who lives a stone's throw away from the marketplace of Sarat.

Surai Hembram, 65, is a respected Santal leader who did a lot of work for the spread of education in the area. He has been sarpanch for a long time and is still an active member of several welfare committees. When we went to his tiled mud house, Surai was harvesting paddy in his small plot of land and came back to meet us.

'This is a problem whose answer I don't know,' Surai said with disarming candour. 'But this is a fact that those who go forward in our community never look back. They don't even return home during the annual festivals. They come reluctantly

when there is a wedding or death in the family, but doesn't like to bring along their children. It takes one generation for the community ties to snap forever.'

'That means the community doesn't gain anything from their prosperity and, at the end of the day, it is education that happens to be the culprit. Isn't it?' I asked him.

'Yes, and this is all the more painful because, unlike in urban caste societies, tribals cannot normally dream of a life without the community. The highest form of punishment one can think of is excommunication from it. But all that is changing, and changing fast.'

We sat in the thatched verandah of his cottage, upon charpoys. On the mud-plastered courtyard, a flock of hens pecked around an extinguished hearth. The call of a rooster, the groan of a well's pulley, the swish of paddy being threshed resolved into the music of a somnolent afternoon.

'Education should make a tribal child proud of his own identity and culture,' Surai continued. 'Not alienate him from it. Textbooks should be written that way, and possibly in his language. But teachers, too, have a role here. Almost all the teachers are from outside, they know nothing of our culture and customs. That can't be helped, but there is a remedy.'

'What is that?' I asked.

'Teachers, too, should study alongside their students. The students should study with their eyes and hands, the teachers with their ears.'

Surai looked at my perplexed face and explained:

'The students should learn reading and writing, the teachers should learn about the community and culture by listening to the people. They should sit with the pupils and eat the midday meal. They come from outside, and where can you buy food

in the village? Also, that way they will ensure the quality of food that is served. But they should also take part in community meetings, give their advice during salisi. That way they can work as a bridge.'

I mentioned the role Sikshasandhan is playing in this regard by appointing language teachers from the community.

'Yes, that is a good step and it is beginning to show results. But you need a lot of time and patience to make an impact. When we set up the high school here at Sarat, there were very few students for the first 4-5 years. We toured the whole panchayat and pleaded with the people. Now they have turn down applicants. But NGOs often cannot afford to spend so much time and abandon a programme mid way, before it can show results. They have their constraints, I know, as they have to depend on funding agencies. But when you are dealing with education, you need time and patience. If things are like this so many years after independence, you cannot change it overnight.'

'You have been actively involved with this field for so manyyears, and have seen things from up close. Have things really changed? Are you optimistic about the future?' I asked him. That was my last question.

Surai Hembram looked into the distance, at a mound of golden paddy awash in late afternoon sun. A young goatherd was taking his flock back into the village.

'Yes, things have changed, and changed for the better,' he finally said, intoning every word. 'But very slowly, not at the desired pace.'

He remained silent for a long moment and then lapsed into nostalgia.

'You have already visited Noto and have seen how backward the place is. Forty years ago, there was not a single literate person in the whole panchayat. People would come to me here, walking 14 kilometers through rocky forest path, for a letter to be read. I used to have a fixed day in the week - Tuesday it was - when I would remain at home to read and write letters for the people of Noto. Now they don't need to come. That is the change.'



VOICE OF WISDOM: Surai Hembram

9. THE GOLDSEEKERS

Yes, things are improving, but not at the desired rate. Since the time of independence, India has inched forward in most human indices, including literacy and education. But during the last two decades, we have fallen behind most of our smaller and poorer South Asian neighbours. One of the many reasons for the success of a country like Bangladesh in this regard, according to Amrtya Sen, is the role the NGOs are playing there.1 India now runs the world's most ambitious mid-day meal programme to feed cooked meal to 25 crore school children every day. The enrolment, too, has increased dramatically during the last few years. But a large percentage of students drop out before they finish high school. The positive signs are counterbalanced by the gloomy scenario in the remote tribal pockets across the country. Here, each success story has a seamy side, each rosy face a dark underbelly.

Every morning, as we left Sikshasandhan's project office at Nuasahi and entered the forest villages, we had to cross the moribund Sunei river. It was once an important tributary of Baitarani that nourished this part of the Simlipal range, until a dam came up in the 1970s. And, like all dams, it flooded large tracts of tribal land and irrigated fields in distant Kaptipada belonging to caste Hindu landowners. A large number of people were displaced, few of them were rehabilitated in a pensive tin-roofed colony at, most migrated to distant mines and collieries. Some, the most hapless of them all, clung on to the edges of forest villages like human detritus. Shankar Dehuri, 55, is one of them.

We met Shankar and his family on the way to Dolipada village in Ramchandrapur GP. The family of five lives in a tiny hovel by the wayside, where a green Forest Department signboard says that this is an elephant corridor. Shankar doesn't own a piece of land. When he was displaced from his village nearly three decades ago, he received Rs. 12 thousand as compensation. That money had long been spent and Shankar has not been able turn around his luck. Now he and his son Laxmi, 25, work as landless daily labourers. They go to work in the irrigated fields at Kaptipada during season; otherwise they break stones in the quarry at Sukhuapatta hills. Their wives collect sal leaves from the forest and make plates. Their life follows the universal pattern of destitution, but there is a twist in the tale. Shankar, the father, can read and write while Laxmi, the son, is an illiterate. The village where Shankar lived had a school where he had studied up to class V. But when they were displaced and came here, there was no school around. Things have changed since then. Now there is a school at Dolipada and Laxmi's 7 year old son studies there.

Things are changing, but very slowly - Surai Hembram had said. This is the story behind the slowness, the story of a missing generation, of moving two steps forward and one step backward.



THE MISSING GENERATION: Shankar Dehuri and his grandchildren. His illiterate son is away at work

As we took leave of Shankar, his whole family was out in the courtyard soaking in the last warmth of a dying sun. His daughter-in-law was drawing floral patterns upon the mud walls with lime, his wife was cutting some herbs she had collected from the jungle and preparing the dinner, while Laxmi was mending the fencing of the tiny homestead land that did not belong to them. His son clung on to his grandfather and watched us keenly, his thumb thrust into his mouth. The only luxury item the family seemed to possess was a radio, with a cycle wheel for an aerial perched atop the straw roof.

The way out of Dolipada passes through an outcrop of rocks with tall imposing monoliths covered with wild creepers. One day, when all the stones from Sukhuapatta hills have been queried, perhaps Laxmi will come here to break these, to gouge out their dark Paleozoic flesh that will become the muscles of 21st century India. But for now, these monoliths stand like some insurmountable riddles under the lengthening shadows. We turn a bend, and soon the jungle gives way to terraced fields cut into the slopes: cropped brown earth interspersed with patches of yellow flowering mustard. A picture-perfect tribal couple, man and wife, returning briskly with loads of golden paddy upon their heads. A jet black cock flashes across the road, expertly dodging the wheels of the speeding motorbike, and a tiny hamlet jumps into view: a knot of neat mud huts, a lotus-bloomed pond, a council of rough wooden benches under a huge tamarind tree. Scenes handcrafted by people living here for generations, displaying ingenuity and a sustainable lifestyle that can be a model for the future, and yet condemned to a life of penury.

But some of the most precious things that they have are not visible to the eyes. Sangho, for example. Each tribal hamlet here has a sangho, a form of association, and all the adult men

and women are automatically its members. Sangho sits in council once a week, where community work are discussed, planned and assigned. One has to pay a fine to the sangho if he or she fails to attend a meeting or carry out a work. The work ranges from clearing and harvesting fields to constructing houses. The concept of hiring labour for private purposes is nonexistent here, so everyone needs the labour of the community in times of need. Sangho also decides and carries out work related to village welfare. This is one of the finest democratic institutions that has evolved over generations without any external mediation or interference, like the traditional panchayat, and is still functioning. Unfortunately, government and other agencies hardly give it due notice, or work to empower and broaden its base. How excellent it would be, if School Management Committee and similar micro-level statutory bodies can work from within the sangho, rather than working in parallel. On an earlier visit to other parts of Odisha, I had seen how community forest management committees have evolved through indigenous village-level institutions, and are doing excellent and innovative conservation work. If forests can be protected and regenerated, then why not education?

These thoughts flit through my mind as we speed along and leave behind the project area for the last time. The winter sun has dipped early behind a line of low hills, and a thin layer of mist hangs over the settlements. A fragrant vapour rises from the ochre soil as life collapses around the brown hutments adorned with blue ribbons of smoke. A sudden yearning wells up within me for the sights and sounds that I have grown accustomed to for the past one week: so much beauty, and yet...



HANDIA BREAK: in the middle of sangho-kamo

At the end of the village, upon a forest clearing, we come across a group of about a dozen people: men, women, children and even pet dogs. Abject and bedraggled, they have set up a temporary home under open skies. Women are preparing food in chulas, while children have turned in upon crude hammocks hung from the branches of trees. They are the dhua sunaris - we learn - the tribe of gold washers who, until a generation ago, used to extract bits of the precious metal from the bed of Baitarani. The river has waned, but the craft still runs in their blood. They now repair ironware of tribal households and forge rings and talisman out of disused coins. They migrate from village to village during these months of harvest, when even the poor people have some money in their pockets. In the thickening shadows, the dhua sunari men showed us their simple age-old implements. They are from Raijharan in Angul district.

Here, even the poorest of the poor have their poorer counterpart, the seamy side of a story has an even seamier

subplot. The tale of dam-displaced Shankar Dehuri seemed to me to be the most harrowing, until I met the dhua sunaris. At least Shankar and his family have a roof over their heads, and a fixed address, while this group of people will spend the freezing forest night under open skies. The last pink glow is fast fading from the western horizon, it will soon be dark. Before the tin shed of Hatsahi school, that also doubles as an atta-chakki, a knot of men have lit a fire.

When we finally leave the forest behind and come to the trickling Sunei, the mist has cleared and countless stars have appeared in the sky. It is a new moon night. Looking up at the vast, bottomless vault shimmering with the astral bodies, I am struck by awe. How terrifying it must be if one has to view them from a hammock in the middle of the forest. But for an educated person, they are constellations: intelligible configurations with names, that have guided sailors and diviners for ages. I hope Yamuna's son will grow up to look at them that way; and Shankar Dehuri's grandson too, if he doesn't join his father at the stone quarry. I hope the bridge at Pungichua will be completed before this monsoon so that Mathai Singh can go to school; and a tubewell will finally be installed at Rugdi NPS; and an anganwadi center will come up at Hudisahi, so that the pupils do not have younger siblings inside the classroom, hungry and sleeping. I hope the newly-built sloping ramps in school buildings will be used by handicapped children, like the one in Birsa's village, and not by teachers for parking their motorbikes. I hope Sikshasandhan will adopt more gram panchayats and introduce more innovative programmes. I hope elite seminars on elementary education will concentrate less on misty theories and numbing statistics, and more on elementary matters - like how to divide a midday meal egg between a school-going kid and her younger sibling at a place where there is no anganwadi center.

As we cross Sunei and move towards Nuasahi, we hear a deep rhythmic thumping emanating from a village. This is a settlement of caste Hindus and the arati is on at a temple of Lord Jagannath. But for a moment I mistake it for a tribal drum transmitting an anxious message: under a silent star-studded sky, it sounds like the beating heart of a country within a country.

1. A lecture delivered by Amartya Sen in New Delhi in December 2011, as reported in Ananda Bazar Patrika, 27 December 2011



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Educated at Alborg University, Denmark, Lauren Alcorn works with Schools Without Borders (SWB), a Canada based organisation. She spent five months in Orissa in 2004 doing field work among its tribal communities.

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